

20.—THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS

Early on a fine February morning in 1946 my wife and I were lucky enough to have Arundel Park to ourselves and there witnessed an episode of bird-behaviour worthy of record. Many birds are known to adopt a 'territory' which they seem to regard as theirs and defend from intruders of the same species, although quite indifferent to the presence of any other forms of life within it. The intruders likewise seem to recognise the bounds of this territory and to suffer, as it were, from a 'guilty conscience' when invading it, so much so that when challenged by the owners, they never put up a fight but allow themselves to be shoo-ed gently off. The great bird-observer, Kirkman, has shown that this patch of 'private property' extends for a foot or two round each nest of the Black-headed Gull, even in closely packed colonies, its edge being apparently plain enough both to owner and non-owner, though invisible to us. Edgar Chance has demonstrated that the cuckoo takes possession of, or at least established dominance over, a much larger area, extending for many acres. It was therefore with much interest that we saw two swans, evidently a mated pair, methodically clear the end of the lake containing their nest, which—looking down—we could clearly see situated upon a small island therein, from three swans whom they not only drove for some distance down the length of the narrow lake, but who finally took to the air and flew away altogether; but not before the following very illuminating incident had taken place.

All we noticed at first was a sun-lit stretch of water picturesquely set between wooded banks and enlivened by swans, moorhens, and a variety of ducks, some of whom still slumbered on one foot by the water's edge, as though not only humans could be afflicted by a hang-over. As we mounted the path to the right an unwonted flapping broke out and we saw two swans with out-stretched neck take to the air and alight again further down the lake. In a few moments they were joined by a third, whose departure was plainly being hastened by another. At this point we began to take notice and counted five swans altogether—two in the 'home' end of the lake that we had just left and three now swimming in the water beyond and below us. Swans in flight had made us interested, since one seldom has the chance to see them from above. The stretched necks and tense effortful, almost frightened sound, either from wing or throat, that accompanied each beat of the wing, were unfamiliar to us, and both this peculiar sound in flight and the prodigious length of the skid, made by the thrust-out feet on alighting, attracted our attention. Standing still, now, we saw swan *A* and *B*, the home-birds—shall we call them?—by no means satisfied with the clearance, swimming in a dignified but purposive fashion towards the three culprits (as we later decided they must be). There was something inexorable about this concerted attack, for it was delivered (as though by collusion) in such a way that the width of the lake was strategically portioned out, leaving as little room as possible for either to be by-passed. I was reminded of two tennis players rushing to the net. Each bird, of course, adopted the 'fighting-display', head curved down and back, wings

up-arched, and propelled itself in jerks, both feet presumably thrusting in unison.

Birds, *C*, *D* and *E*, appeared to take no notice, till striking distance was reached, when birds *A* and *B*, each selecting one of them, began a real flapping, skimming the water with outstretched neck in the movement that, if speeded up, would end in flight. The attacked birds, meanwhile, made no show of resistance, but scuttled rapidly away and finally took to the air. That is to say, the attacked two departed, but bird *E* remained, now to the rear of *A* and *B*.

The flying pair, *C* and *D*, went off down the lake but, still within sight, wheeled and came back at a higher level, as though their real objective lay in distant waters, far behind the 'home' and to our left as we turned to face it. Wheeling still more sharply they passed from view behind the shoulder of hill on which we stood, and our attention returned to the lake. Here, birds *A* and *B* had turned in the water and were presently behind bird *E*; that is to say on the home side of him. This manœuvre would evidently enable him also to be ejected. But, before hostilities could begin, back flew birds *C* and *D*, passed above the trio, wheeled and came down nearer to bird *E* than to *A* and *B*.

Was the whole performance to begin again? Birds *A* and *B* set to work, quietly efficient as before. No fluster, no bluff; just a dispassionate firmness; something like policemen about to check a Car Licence. But this time, no warnings were needed; all three birds, *C*, *D* and *E*, began a hasty flapping flight down the lake, which merged gently into a slow rise above the surface; then, with gaining height and a wheel round and up, passed us on eye-level, and away into the landscape where they finally disappeared. This flight was just the same in direction as that of *C* and *D* before. Evidently, all three were now going to the original objective, perhaps returning to the water from which they had come.

Although we remained in the park for another half-hour they did not re-appear, and we saw swans *A* and *B* back on their island, tending the nest.

Now, all this may seem exceedingly trivial and ordinary, yet it contains elements of deep interest. Apart from the obvious collaboration of swans *A* and *B*, which seems to indicate some mutual understanding and unity of aim, besides a power of foresight disclosed by the strategic positions taken, there is in the behaviour of swans *C* and *D* something even more striking, namely their return to a danger from which they had escaped. Why this return? Having gone off again, this time accompanied by swan *E*, they do not return. It seems hard not to suppose that they came back to fetch him. If that were so, it follows that they regarded him as one of their party, noticed his absence, remembered where he was and reflected that he might fail to follow!

At that distance, it was hard to be sure, but judging from his size he might easily have been a last year's youngster just turned white. Cygnets remain attached to their parents for some time, and although one seldom sees two broods, one gray and the other white, one often sees clusters of adult swans showing no

animosity among themselves, who may easily be of common parentage and not yet paired; for life-long bachelors and spinsters among swans are known to all park-keepers experienced in their ways.

The assumption of kinship presents, at any rate, the simplest theory, and if kinship were absent it only makes more impressive an act of obvious camaraderie, almost of 'rescue'. But the question I ask myself is, how these combined operations are organised? Which mind decides, leads or directs, and how does the other know its part? Given the ordinary human tendency to read ourselves into the animals, it would seem for all the world as though the returning two had brought courage to their fellow, or even said to him, 'Now, come along old chap, this way; make an effort!' and that thus exhorted he dared and did. But which of the two parents first noticed the absence of 'our Bertram', and when and how did the other come to share this misgiving?

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21.—SOME FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS IN POST-WAR BURMA

In the *Journal* for December 1946, under the above heading, Lt.-Col. J. K. Stanford has directed attention to some of the more glaring gaps in our knowledge of the status and habits of Burma birds. The list of queries could be expanded almost indefinitely, especially if one were to include the mountain birds, and also problems connected with the geographical distribution of subspecies; but there are just one or two that have been in our minds for some time, which I would like to add to the list.

Sitta formosa. Beautiful Nuthatch

This is a very lovely and quite unmistakeable bird, yet records of it from Burma are very few. In early December 1938 I climbed a 5,000 ft. hill in the Arakan Yomas on the border of the Thayetmyo and Minbu districts, and saw several of these birds in the ever-green forest along the top, and collected one specimen; yet there is no record of this bird from Mt. Victoria, which is not so very far away to the north and which has been intensively worked, nor elsewhere from Arakan; Gen. Christison's paper (*Journal*, April 1946) does not mention it.

In early December 1944 I saw a solitary bird at about 6,000 ft. near the junction of the 'Nmai Hka' with its east bank tributary the Mekh Rame, in far Northern Burma. The only other records known to me are one from the Kachin hills and one from Kengtung.

Surely it must occur at some intermediate places between these widely scattered points?

Cisticola exilis. Siamese Golden-headed Fantail Warbler

Oates found this species in the Pegu plain, near Myitkyo and the Pegu-Sittang canal. There is no subsequent record. In July 1941 we searched the places where Oates found it, but without